



Don't Die In Bed: The Brief, Intense Life of Richard Halliburton

John H. Alt

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Richard Halliburton was a misfit, a rebel, in an America coming of age in the world. He couldn't see himself fitting into that America, although he was very much its product with his can-do attitude and his things-will-get-better belief. For all that, he was a round peg faced with nothing but the square holes his country offered him. He just could not see things the way most people saw them. His parents wanted him to play by the rules, to live an even tenor, and he scorned the rules, especially the phrase, "even tenor." Despite having no respect for the rules he became wildly successful because of his wildly improbable life as a travel-adventure writer. Because he dared, he became an icon of his era, more famous in his day than Amelia Earhart, with farmers' wives in Topeka, factory workers in Detroit, and Newspaper boys in Cleveland buying his books. He knew many people who would not fit in handy boxes society offered them. Paul Mooney sailed across the Pacific with him in a Chinese junk. Moya Stephens and he flew around the world in an open-cockpit biplane. Stephens flew as stunt-pilot in the movies of Howard Hughes. Elly Beinhorn was Germany's Amelia Earhart. The flamboyant woman Pancho Barnes signed on as seaman on a ship headed into the Mexican Revolution. She founded the Happy Bottom Riding Club in the Mojave Desert. Other acquaintances include The White Rane of Sarawak, Lenin's widow, and Pyotr Ermakov, an assassin of the Czar and his family. Halliburton was the first in the West to report what really happened to the Romanov family while his account was ignored. (But in 1979 Alexander Avdonin confirmed it.) A catalog of events in his life would include these. He was on a ship out of Macao boarded by Chinese pirates. He starred in a talking movie of his era. He crossed the Himalayas on foot to visit remote Ladakh. He flew across the Sahara to Timbuktu. He swam the Panama Canal as the S.S. Halliburton, paying pennies for his tonnage. A restless man, his energy drove him in search of new adrenalin highs while another side of him longed for the peace and solitude he found at night in the jungle of Angkor Wat, where the ruined civilization reminded him of life's brevity and the vanity of human wishes. A kind and charitable man, he easily made friends and remained loyal to them, thoughtful to his parents. He had no illusions about his place in human memory. He knew he would be forgotten or, if remembered at all, that he would be recalled as the author who spoke at ladies' tea parties and who dove into a three-inch-deep pool at the Taj Mahal.

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